

Politeness Theory Patterns in the Online and In-Person Classroom

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Abstract:

Politeness theory and its relevance in the classroom have not been explored to understand how students and instructors maintain face and mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs). This study sought to understand how instructors and students define “politeness” in the classroom, how both parties maintain face, and what differences between online and in-person classroom contexts occur. Based on computer-aided coding of data from open-ended questionnaires, results indicated that, when instructors use bald-on record FTAs in the classroom, this causes students to become more reticent in in-person and online classroom contexts. Instructors and students both maintain face by preparing for class and exhibiting knowledge, regardless of the context, and with the transition to online classes, both instructors and students expect politeness to be replicated through tasks such as turning off or keeping on video feeds and muting microphones.

Introduction:

Face-threatening acts occur daily in the classroom and within the interpersonal relationship of teacher and student. Teachers correct and reprimand students about their classwork or behaviors, and students challenge teachers based on their accuracy and credibility. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Goffman's face theory (1965) apply well to the classroom setting and the behaviors teachers and students exhibit. Research has briefly explored this application of politeness theory and face theory within the classroom, but not the methods that teachers and students use to maintain face and mitigate face-threatening acts. With the increase in digital and online classroom formats as a result of COVID-19, one must wonder how politeness in the classroom translates or changes from in-person classroom settings to online classroom settings. This study sought to understand the methods students define as polite in in-person and online classroom settings and how politeness changes from the in-person to the online classroom setting.

Research Questions:

- RQ₁:** How do instructors perform face-threatening acts in the classroom?
- RQ₂:** How do students and instructors maintain face in the classroom?
- RQ₃:** How do students and instructors define politeness in the in-person and online classroom setting?
- RQ₄:** How does politeness in the in-person classroom setting change or differ in an online classroom setting?

Methods:

Participants:

- 106 Students and 33 instructors above the age of 18 who were either currently enrolled or teaching participated.

Data Collection:

- A mass email provided through the university with the link to complete an anonymous questionnaire was sent to students and instructors.
- Some students received access through the School of Communications research board and were compensated extra credit for participation.
- Two open-ended surveys were created, one individualized for teachers and one for students, asking 5 questions about the in-person classroom experience and then 5 questions about the online experience learning and/or teaching.

Data Analysis:

- Phronetic Iterative Approach
- Coding and Thematizing
- Computer-Aided Coding and Coloring

Results:

Instructor Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs)

- **In-Person:** Correcting or notifying a student of a mistake in classwork or participation was the most common FTA.
 - Positive FTAs – Corrections, feedback, criticisms, and challenges.
 - Negative FTAs – Reminders, calling on students, and asking for further explanations.
- **Online:** Feedback on classwork and assignments was mirrored. Camera use is challenged, questioned, commanded, or criticized when not in use.

Student Responses to Instructor FTAs

- Students felt embarrassed and participation declined after experiencing an FTA in both in-person and online contexts.
- Online, students deactivate technology such as webcam video and chat to decrease participation after feeling embarrassed.

Maintaining Positive Face/Credibility

- **Students:** Maintain face & credibility by paying attention, attendance, participation in class, asking questions, and using verbal and nonverbal cues.
- **Instructors:** Maintain credibility & face by showing preparedness, transparency, knowledge of content, and experience/expertise.

Defining Politeness (Students & Instructor Opinion)

- **In-Person:** A student who arrives on time, pays attention, listens, participates, has manners, uses turn-taking, follows rules, and does not use their phone or social media during class time.
- **Online:** A student who keeps their camera on and microphone off to not distract, is on time, completes homework and assignments on time, prepares for class, uses eye contact and nonverbals, and pays attention.

Conclusion:

- RQ₁:** In both settings, instructors use bald-on record FTAs towards students which results in embarrassment, humiliation, and hesitancy to participate in class.
- RQ₂:** Students maintain face and credibility in both the online and in-person classroom by participating, coming to class prepared, and turning their homework in on time. Instructors show credibility by being open and transparent with students and emphasizing the knowledge the instructors possess to bolster the self-image they wish to portray.
- RQ₃:** Politeness is culturally based as individuals acclimate and develop group and cultural norms for the classroom setting. More research is needed to clearly define “politeness.”
- RQ₄:** Individuals attempt to mirror or alter their idea of politeness in the in-person setting to fit the online context. Students show nonverbal cues in an in-person classroom and reflect this by keeping videos on in synchronous settings to show attentiveness.